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Mothers' and Fathers' Aspirations for Sons and Daughters*

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Abstract

A series of questions on educational aspirations for their children was asked of 436 black parents in Detroit. Responses were used to develop measures of a range of aspirations. Sex of parent and sex of child were not significantly related to the width of the range of aspirations. Significant associations between social class status and the width of the range of aspirations were shown for the entire sample as well as for each of the sex of parent by sex of child subgroups. These results support earlier findings which show little variation in black parents' aspirations for children by sex of parent or sex of child. Other considerations, however, emphasize the need for collecting data by sex of parent and sex of child.

Mothers' and Fathers' Aspirations for Sons and Daughters

In recent years, greater sensitivity to sex as a variable has led to widespread recognition that social science research often ignores that variable. Thus, there are critiques of the tendency to collect data in family studies from readily available women who are at home when interviewers call, and of the assumption that these data adequately represent men's responses (Safilios-Rothschild, 1969). There are also critiques of the tendency to collect data only from men on such topics as economic activity (Nash, 1975), social stratification (Chase, 1975; Guppy and Siltanen, 1977), and crime and delinquency (Smart, 1976). Some researchers boldly declare that they are "controlling" on sex by collecting data on men only, just as they "control" on race by collecting data on whites only, and "control" on culture by collecting data on United States college students only. This is a weak form of control that can more accurately be described as ignoring rather than controlling a variable.

The present study reports data on parents' educational aspirations for their children based upon a unique sample. First, we have data on a sample of black American parents, and although that is a limitation—comparative data on other racial, ethnic, and cultural groups would certainly be useful—it is at least a limitation that complements the far more usual practice of confining the data to white Americans. Second, we have data on men and women differentiated by social class and reporting on sons and daughters. There are few studies that have data on mothers' and fathers' aspirations for sons and daughters, and there is no other study with such data on a stratified sample of black mothers and fathers. This provides an opportunity to examine how

the independent variables of sex of parent, sex of child, and social class influence the dependent variable, educational aspirations. Extremely limited research on black parents' level of aspirations indicates that aspirations do not vary by sex of child and that social class status is directly related to the level of aspirations (see Rodman and Voydanoff, 1978, for a review of this literature). The present data allow us to test the hypotheses that the width of the range of aspirations does not vary by sex of parent or sex of child and that social class status is inversely associated with the width of the range of aspirations, simultaneously controlling for sex of parent and sex of child.

The data are also unique in another sense. Almost all studies of aspiration deal with a level of apiration that is represented by a single score or a single category. Our approach differs by assuming that individuals have a range of aspirations and by asking a series of questions to get information on that range. We have already demonstrated that it is possible to collect information on a range of aspirations, and that using such a variable can be more informative than using a level of aspiration (Rodman, Voydanoff, and Lovejoy, 1974). One of our major findings has been that higher social class status is related to a narrower range of aspirations. If a person does indeed have a range of aspirations, then we are unsure, when we force that individual to respond to a single level question, from which part of the range we are getting an answer (Rodman, 1963). Depending on such things as the individual's fear of failure, risk-taking orientation, level of defense (McClelland, 1951), and perception of the research situation, we may get a response from anywhere in that individual's range. It thus makes sense to try to collect data about the entire range of aspirations.

METHOD

Sample

In the fall of 1967, 436 parents of 255 black kindergarten and preschool children were interviewed as part of the Head Start Evaluation and Research Program in Detroit, Michigan. The children were initially selected by other researchers to participate in several psychological research projects. One sample of 115 children was selected from five inner-city kindergarten classrooms which had been suggested by the Detroit Board of Education as having teachers receptive to research. In another sample, 40 thirty-month old children were selected from returns to letters sent to parents whose names had appeared in newspaper birth listings two years previously. A third sample of 100 3½ and 4½ year old children was selected from five Head Start classes and seven private nursery schools.

The parents of all the children were then interviewed separately in their homes regarding a variety of subjects, including their educational aspirations for their children.

In the initial selection the samples were stratified by social class in terms of a criterion that could be readily obtained from school records. Neither parent of "lower-class" children had gone beyond high school. For "middle-class" children, both parents had finished high school and at least one parent must have gone beyond high school. In the first sample described above, only lower-class children were selected; in the other two samples, lower-class and middle-class children were selected. In the analysis of our data, however, social class is determined according to the Hollingshead

(1957) Two Factor Index of Social Position, using data on parental occupation as well as education. Interviews were conducted with 436 parents or guardians (hereafter referred to as parents) of the 255 children. Of these, 239 are mothers, 174 are fathers, and 23 are other relatives including grandparents and stepparents. All respondents except 14 fathers lived in the household with the child at the time of the interview. The social class distribution of the parents is as follows: Class I, 14; Class II, 34; Class III, 41; Class IV, 159; Class V, 188.

Measures

Our first measure of the range of aspirations—Range of Educational Aspirations (Happy/Probability)—is based on a "happiness" criterion and a "probability" criterion. The former is developed from the following series of questions: "Now I'd like to know how happy or unhappy you would be in each of the following situations. How would you feel if (your child) stops school after finishing the 6th grade?" A card was shown with the following categories: 1—very happy; 2—a little happy; 3—neither happy nor unhappy; 4—a little unhappy; 5—very unhappy. The question was repeated for each of the following educational levels: 9th grade, 12th grade, 2 years of college, 4 years of college, and more than 4 years of college.[1]

These responses were used to determine which educational levels each respondent was happy with, based on a reply of either "verry happy" or "a little happy."

The "probability" criterion was developed from the following series of questions: "What do you think the chances are of (your child)

really finishing 9th grade?" This question was repeated for 12th grade, 2 years of college, 4 years of college and more than 4 years of college. Respondents were asked to choose one of the following answers: almost sure, fairly sure, 50-50, not much chance, almost no chance.

The Range of Educational Aspirations (Happy/Probability) is operationally defined to include those educational levels (1) that the respondents were happy with and (2) that the respondents said there was at least a 50-50 chance that their children would complete.

Two considerations are used in order to develop the categories for our measure. One consideration is the highest educational level at which the respondents met both our "happiness" criterion and "probability" criterion—that is, the respondents had to be happy with that level and to believe that there was at least a 50-50 chance their children would complete that level. The second consideration is the range and pattern of educational levels for which the respondents met both criteria. The educational levels are combined into the following groups:

(I) four years of college or more

(II) two years of college

(III) high school

(IV) 9th grade or less

The categories for the Range of Educational Aspirations (Happy/Probability), based on the educational levels met by the "happiness" and "probability" criteria as follows:

High level-very narrow range (group I only)

High level-narrow range (groups I and II)

High level-wide range (group I and group III and/or IV)

Medium level-narrow range (groups II and/or III)

Medium level-wide range (groups II and/or III and IV)

Low level-narrow range (group IV only)

Thus, in order for parents to be placed in the high level-wide range category, they must meet our "happiness" and "probability" criteria for their children completing four years of college or more. Moreover, they must also meet these two criteria for either "high school" or "9th grade or less." To be placed in the high level-very narrow range category, parents must meet our "happiness" and "probability" criteria only for "four years of college or more."

By combining a "probability" criterion with the "happiness" criterion in our measure of the Range of Educational Aspirations (Happy/Probability), we made sure that respondents could not be counted as aspiring to a particular level merely because they stated they would be happy with that level. For the same reason the second measure combines a "sacrifice" criterion with the "happiness" criterion. We asked the following series of questions to add the motivational (sacrifice) criterion:

"People have different ideas about how important it is to go to school. If you had to give up going to places like restaurants and movies; if you had to get along with less clothing and furniture; with an older car and an older house; if you had

to do extra work, like taking an extra job . . . If you had to do things like that, how many things of that kind would you do in order to help (your child) finish junior high school?"

The question was repeated for finishing high school, two years more than high school, four years of college, and going to school after four years of college. The respondents were shown a card with the following categories: all of them, most of them, about half of them, some of them, and none of them. Using this question in the same way we used the "probability" question, requiring the parents' willingness to give up at least "about half of them" to qualify for an aspiration level, and combining these responses with the "happiness" criterion, we came up with our measure of the Range of Educational Aspirations (Happy/Sacrifice).

RESULTS

The data on the Range of Education Aspirations (Happy/Probability) are presented in Table 1. Neither sex of parent (Q = .09, NS) nor sex of child (Q = .14, NS) are significantly related to the width of the range of aspirations. The small differences found indicate that fathers are slightly more likely to be in the high level-narrow range category than mothers and that parents are slightly more likely to have a high level-narrow range of aspirations for sons than for daughters.

(Insert Table 1 about here)

A separate analysis on the association between social class and width of the range of aspirations for each of the sex of parent by sex of child subgroups yields the following results: Mothers-Daughters, $d_{yx} = .28$, $p < .001$; Mothers-sons, $d_{yx} = .25$, $p < .001$; Fathers-Daughters, $d_{yx} = .35$, $p < .001$; Fathers-Sons, $d_{yx} = .28$, $p < .001$. Collapsing these subgroups—that is combining the data for all parents and all children—gives a d_{yx} of .29 ($p < .001$).[2] It is therefore clear that there is a moderate association between social class and the width of the range of aspirations for the total sample, and that this association is maintained when controls are simultaneously introduced for sex of parent and sex of child.

Table 2 presents the findings for the Range of Educational Aspirations (Happy/Sacrifice). These findings are very similar to those in Table 1.

(Insert Table 2 about here)

Once again sex of parent ($Q = .20$, NS) and sex of child ($Q = .16$, NS) are not significantly related to the width of the range of aspirations. As in Table 1, fathers are more likely to be in the high level-narrow range category while parents are more likely to have a high level-narrow range of aspirations for sons.

The following associations were found between social class and the width of the range of aspirations for each of the subgroups: Mothers-Daughters, $d_{yx} = .26$, $p < .003$; Mothers-Sons, $d_{yx} = .35$, $p < .001$; Fathers-Daughters, $d_{yx} = .40$, $p < .001$; Fathers-Sons, $d_{yx} = .25$, $p < .003$. For the entire sample, $d_{yx} = .31$, $p < .001$. Thus, the relationship between social class and width of the range of aspirations, which obtains for the entire sample, is also statistically significant for each of the sex of parent by sex of child subgroups.

DISCUSSION

In several prior studies we have presented theoretical and empirical data on the relationship between social class and the range of values or aspirations (Rodman, 1966; Rodman et al, 1974; Rodman and Voydanoff, 1978). These studies also discuss the practical implications of the findings, since it makes a good deal of difference whether lower-class people are characterized as having merely lower aspirations (or different values) or having a wider range of aspirations or values which includes the dominant or middle-class values.

In this report we present data (on a sample of black American parents) that are broken down by the sex of the parent and the sex of the child. In view of the importance of sex as a variable, especially in relation to the early experiences of children, it is of interest to examine behavioral and attitudinal data by sex of parent and sex of child. Our findings on the range of parents' educational aspirations for their young children indicate that sex of parent or of child does not make a significant difference.

It is not clear, of course, what the findings might be for a different sample. How would other groups in the United States respond, and how would groups in other societies respond (Douglas and Wong, 1977)? There are strong cultural influences and stereotypes that affect the developmental perceptions that individuals have about the appropriate educational and occupational achievement, and other types of achievement, for their sons and daughters (Mead, 1935; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974, pp. 335-338; Williams, 1977, pp. 179-185). In a strongly traditional patriarchal society, both mothers and fathers might agree

that sons, and not daughters, should be encouraged to pursue educational and occupational goals. By contrast, in a strongly egalitarian society, they may both encourage sons and daughters equally to pursue educational and occupational goals. For societies between these poles, such as the United States, there are still considerable differences in popular attitudes about men and women. The ongoing debate about the Equal Rights Amendment certainly makes that clear. It is therefore of interest that among American blacks the findings about the relationship between social class and the range of educational aspirations, for both men and women, reporting on both sons and daughters, are similar. In this sample social class is more important in relation to educational aspirations than either sex of parent or sex of child.

Further work needs to be done on refining the measures of the range of aspirations and on developing the theoretical and practical significance of the concept (Rodman and Voydanoff, 1978). Our findings on the relationship between social class status and the width of the range of aspirations, of course, need further validation. Several studies have shown no sex differences in black parents' aspirations for their children, in contrast to higher levels of aspiration for sons among whites (Westoff et al., 1961; Bell, 1965; Kandel, 1971). This is in keeping with our findings for black parents. But we need data on other values, aspirations, and attitudes to show the pattern of similarities and differences by sex. And of course we need such data on other racial, ethnic, and national groups in order to comparatively examine those factors that contribute toward similar or different attitudes between the sexes.

FOOTNOTES

[1]If a respondent answered "very happy" (category 1) for two educational levels in a row the interviewer did not ask the rest of the questions. It was assumed that if a person were "very happy" with two levels in a row, he/she would be happy with all remaining higher levels. There are fifty-eight respondents who were "very happy" with high school and two years of college and were assumed to be happy with four years of college and more than four years of college. Seventy-six respondents were "very happy" with two years of college and four years of college and were assumed to be happy with more than four years of college.

[2]All computations are based on respondents in the high-level categories; these categories have been dichotomized by combining the "very narrow" and "narrow" categories.

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Table 1

Range of Educational Aspirations (Happy/Probability)

by Sex of Parent, Sex of Child, and Social Class

	Mother							
	Daughter				Son			
	Class				Class			
	I-III %	IV %	V %	T %	I-III %	IV %	V %	T %
High level-very narrow range	76	44	21	38	73	46	33	46
High level-narrow range	12	22	19	19	15	24	13	17
High level-wide range	6	28	46	33	8	16	37	24
Medium level-narrow range	6	6	11	8	4	14	17	13
Medium level-wide range	-	-	3	2	-	-	-	-
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	17	46	57	120	26	37	52	115

	Father							
	Daughter				Son			
	Class				Class			
	I-III %	IV %	V %	T %	I-III %	IV %	V %	T %
High level-very narrow range	86	34	14	35	83	46	19	46
High level-narrow range	7	46	25	30	13	21	29	22
High level-wide range	7	11	47	26	4	29	42	27
Medium level-narrow range	-	9	14	9	-	4	10	5
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	15	35	36	86	23	28	31	82

Table 2

Range of Educational Aspirations (Happy/Sacrifice)

by Sex of Parent, Sex of Child, and Social Class

	Mother							
	Daughter				Son			
	Class				Class			
	I-III %	IV %	V %	T %	I-III %	IV %	V %	T %
High level-very narrow range	79	44	17	36	79	46	23	45
High level-narrow range	7	15	21	17	13	14	10	12
High level-wide range	7	26	40	30	4	23	42	26
Medium level-narrow range	7	15	22	17	4	17	23	16
Medium level-wide range	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	15	41	53	109	24	35	40	99

	Father							
	Daughter				Son			
	Class				Class			
	I-III %	IV %	V %	T %	I-III %	IV %	V %	T %
High level-very narrow range	93	36	14	37	83	48	27	50
High level-narrow range	7	36	23	25	13	20	23	19
High level-wide range	-	6	46	22	4	28	37	24
Medium level-narrow range	-	22	17	16	-	4	13	7
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	15	33	35	83	23	25	30	78